

Informational Interviewing: Both an Educational and Networking Tool

by *Jeanine Dames*

Those of us who are career services professionals understand the value of informational interviewing: It is a fantastic tool for students to build their knowledge about a specific practice area while serving as an incredibly effective networking device. Although the initial goal is to make contacts and learn about practice in a particular field or market, it is amazing how many of these informal, informational sessions result in job opportunities, either directly or indirectly.

The benefits of informational interviewing

One enormous benefit of informational interviewing over other forms of networking is that students can start as early as their first year of law school and maintain some of those contacts throughout law school and their legal careers. Moreover, the benefits of informational interviewing are mutual. Many law school alumni enjoy speaking about their daily practice with eager, bright-eyed, first-year students. A brief meeting, followed by a well-written thank you card and a series of emailed questions of advice and guidance over the next two years, could potentially build a long-term networking relationship.

Alumni who are involved in these relationships will feel part of students' educational experiences and career decisions and will take pride in their successes. Students will benefit not only from the advice received but also from the contacts alumni have both within their own organizations and outside their organizations.

In addition, for the introverted student, a series of well-planned informational interviews with patient alumni can do wonders to boost confi-

dence, both through the additional knowledge gained and through the practice of interpersonal skills. Further, as students engage in informational interviewing, they are building skills important to the practice of law. Eventually they will use these same basic skills to reach out to clients and colleagues and to maintain those integral relationships.

In general, and even more so in a challenging job market, employers prefer to hire people they have some previous relationship with, or at least some added knowledge of beyond the four corners of a résumé. With that in mind, informational interviewing has become much more than an educational tool; it is fast becoming a vital tool in every student's job search. Career services professionals can assist students by educating them about effective ways to schedule and conduct informational interviews and, perhaps even more importantly, by guiding students as to how to properly maintain these newfound networking contacts.

Educating students on the basics of informational interviewing

An informational interview is an opportunity for the student to ask the questions, such as: (1) what it means to practice day to day in a particular field; (2) the various career paths successful attorneys have taken in that area; and (3) the skills necessary for success in that field. This information can then be effectively used by students to write better cover letters and more clearly articulate their interests and applicable skills in interviews. In addition, it is important to remind students that an informational interview is an opportunity for them to meet and impress a practicing attorney with their questions and pro-

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professionalism. This type of first meeting, even though solely informational, does create a lasting impact.

The first step to an effective informational interview is for the student to identify people he or she would like to meet. This list may include attorneys in a specialized practice area at law firms, corporations, or public service organizations, or attorneys from outside the law school's geographical region if the student is looking to relocate upon graduation. Fellow alumni from law school and college as well as alumni from student organizations are great resources for informational interviewing, but students may also request informational interviews from someone with whom they have no connection.

Career services professionals can provide great assistance in this first step. Either through the career services office, or in conjunction with alumni affairs, provide students with a list of law school alumni, potentially separated by practice area and/or geographical area. If your office does not have such lists, Martindale-Hubbell or other databases may be the first place to direct a student. Through www.martindale.com, students can search for attorneys at participating law firms and corporations by geographical area and by law school.

Once the student has identified the attorneys he or she would like to meet with, the next step, and often the most challenging for the student, is requesting the meeting. Requests for informational interviews can be made by mail, email, or phone. When requesting the meeting, the student should let the individual know that he or she is not requesting a job interview — just an opportunity to discuss the attorney's career path and practice. As career services professionals, we can assist students with this step by providing sample letters or even, when appropriate, setting up meetings directly.

Because these meetings are not job interviews, some students may feel it is acceptable to arrive late or dress in jeans and sandals. Remind students that informational interviews should be

treated as formal meetings. There is a very good chance that students will cross paths again with the individuals they meet, and strong first impressions can go a long way to creating potential allies for later job searches. Encourage students to prepare for their meetings by researching the individual they are meeting with and his or her organization. Students should be ready with a series of questions, since in this type of format the student will be asking most of the questions. At the close of a meeting, the student should inquire as to whether there are any other individuals the attorney would recommend the student speak with for informational purposes.

Encourage students to send a thank you note immediately after an informational interview. This short note is the first step in maintaining this newfound contact. The next step is for students to remain in touch on a monthly or bi-monthly basis via email or phone. This continued contact is a way for students to further engage a lawyer they've met in their career searches by seeking the lawyer's advice and guidance on a variety of topics, including course selection, externship opportunities, and job search strategies. Many students ignore the importance of this follow-up, but these contacts can keep a student fresh in an attorney's mind, and, when a career opportunity arises, the student may be thought of by the attorney.

How career services professionals can encourage students to go on informational interviews

Career service professionals have seen the results and know the value of an effective informational interview, but at times it is difficult to convince a student of that value. We can make the process easier for students by providing them with tools, such as alumni lists and sample letters for requesting meetings, but one of the most effective ways to demonstrate to students that informational interviewing works is by sharing the experiences of people who have done it well.

One of the best networkers I ever encountered was a former student, now an attorney, who went

on a series of informational interviews throughout his college and law school years. He kept every business card from every individual he ever met. Every Friday, to this day, he sets aside 30 minutes to reconnect with two or three of those people. When he told me this story I was fascinated and asked him what so many of us hear from our students: How? He made it seem so simple. With some people he picks up the phone and schedules a cup of coffee; with others who are more senior, he writes a handwritten note, just to catch up and wish them well; and, of course, during the holidays he reconnects with the entire group of those whose business cards he has collected. His motto is that as long as he does not lose touch with them it is always easy to reconnect.

This former student's story made me reflect on his career path. Since he graduated, he has changed jobs twice, each time achieving a significant promotion in salary and responsibility, and he is now in the midst of considering another change. Every time he made a change, it was the company or firm that came looking for him, and each time it originated with a contact established through those initial informational interviews.

I now share that story with every student who expresses doubt about the effectiveness of informational interviewing.

Jeanine Dames is Associate Director, LLM Career Planning, at Fordham University School of Law.